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ABSTRACT

In order to establish competency based entrance requirements for freshman composition, a midwestern university sampled six freshman composition and four basic writing classes for errors in their essay writing. ACT English and social studies scores and several reading scores were also gathered. All this data was computer analyzed by the multiple regression procedure, with the final holistic rating as the criterion variable. Results indicated the holistic rating as the best indicator of success in the freshman writing course, and the ACT English score as second best. Number of errors, however, did characterize the remedial writers. While the ACT English and the preliminary holistic rating are workable for entrance testing, they are not the best combination for determining freshman composition entrance for students who have spent a semester under remediation or who are testing for a second time. Therefore the university is using a holistic essay rating plus an error count on that essay as a freshman composition entrance test for students who are testing for the second time. (HOD)

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Defining the Basic Writing Student by Count

Teachers of remedial composition courses know unskilled writing when they see it. It is characterized by numerous errors--in spelling, tense markers, noun plurals, pronoun use, sentence boundary markers, etc.--and is generally shorter, less specific, less logical, and more disorganized than the writing that is considered to be of college level. Writers who produce essays of this quality are regarded as candidates for remedial writing classes. But when you have 4000, or even 300, students entering school in the fall, how will you determine when the writers are so unskilled that they should be placed in your remedial course? What measure or measures will you use? What will be the cut-off point indicating need for remediation?

Various schools have dealt with this problem in different ways. In an effort to answer some of these questions at Illinois State University, I and my colleagues have been researching placement procedures over the last two or three years. Central to our investigation has been the relationship of error to writing quality.

The research began with a study that compared students in a freshman composition class with those in a remedial writing class. The sample was small and the generalizability limited, yet this pilot study did lead to further research. The two

classes were compared on T-unit length, clause length, writing apprehension, and errors on a revision passage. Original writing was not compared. Of the measures employed, the two classes differed only on error count. In roughly 150 words, the remedial class averaged 6.67 errors, while the freshman composition class averaged 1.28, the difference being significant beyond the .001 level.

This difference is not surprising, since unskillful writing is known to be characterized by error, and remediation correspondingly aims for reduction of errors. The literature in the field likewise assumes this characteristic. Slotnik and Rogers, for example, in applying factor analysis to a large corpus of National Assessment papers, found only two significant factors differentiating good and poor papers: number of errors and essay length. The City College of New York at one time regarded a five percent error count as indicative of a need for remediation (as reported by Barbara Quint Gray), and LaGuardia Community College eight errors or more in 300 words (this reported by Roberta Matthews). Shaughnessy reports that remedial writing contains ten to thirty errors in 300 words, while Labov observes that readers will tolerate only two percent errors.

Acting on our preliminary findings and on published research, our Freshman Writing Committee devised a set of error criteria for further investigation. These criteria divided errors into those we considered more serious (sentence boundaries, subject-verb agreement, tense markers, noun plural markers) and less serious (spelling, pronoun case and reference, apostrophes, and omitted words). Each occurrence of the more serious

errors was counted, but only one occurrence of those regarded as less serious.

These error criteria were then applied in a multiple regression analysis of the writing of two freshman composition classes. We counted errors on an in-class essay written at the beginning of the semester. The criteria were found to have a .473 correlation with final grades. Employing the multiple regression predictability formula, we found that the error count could be no greater than 3.56 in order to assure a reasonable chance for a final grade of C. In additional informal checks made by teachers of the remedial classes, the students who ended the course with a passing grade had in general fewer than four errors.

All this preparatory analysis led up to the full-scale research we conducted in the fall of 1980 in order to establish competency-based entrance requirements for freshman composition. Our initial procedures were to randomly select a sample of six freshman comp and four basic writing classes. From these ten classes we gathered, at the beginning of the semester and at the end, an impromptu in-class essay, a revision of Kellogg Hunt's "Aluminum" passage, and a cloze test. ("Aluminum" is a series of short sentences to be rewritten in a coherent paragraph. Using it has the advantage of demanding the same tasks of all students. The cloze test was a short essay with every seventh word omitted, to be inserted by the student.)

The cloze tests were scored for the approximate word, and the "Aluminum" revisions were scored for errors as listed

on our error criteria. The essays, both pre and post, were rated at the end of the semester by three trained readers who had no knowledge of time of writing, course represented, or scores of the other readers. Then the essays were submitted to an error count using our criteria. We also gathered ACT English and Social Studies scores and several reading scores. All this data was computer-analyzed by the multiple regression procedure, with the final holistic rating as our criterion variable.

Our error counts did not come out as the best predictors. Instead, we have the preliminary holistic rating as the best indicator of success in our freshman writing course, and the ACT English score as second best. Together, their R^2 accounts for 48 percent of the variability in the final essay rating. So we are adopting these two measures for determining entrance into our freshman composition course.

Number of errors, however, did in this study, as in earlier research, characterize the remedial writers. At the beginning of the semester their essays averaged 4.06 errors per 150 words in contrast to 1.89 for the freshman comp students. At the end of the semester, the remedial writers had reduced their errors to a mean of 2.88, a decrease significant at the .001 level, while the freshman comp students had dropped to 1.48, a slightly less significant decrease. As far as the essay ratings are concerned, our remedial classes increased, again at a more significant level than our freshman comp students (beyond .001). While these improvements are encouraging in that our remedial courses are producing the effects we have aimed for, it is, all

the same, a futile encouragement, since the State of Illinois has recently mandated the end of all remedial courses at the university level by 1984, and the courses are already being phased out.

While the essay ratings and the ACT English scores were adopted as our major placement measures, we do still have a use for the essay and error count combination. Errors on the preliminary essay did have a significant correlation with the final essay rating, a coefficient of .51. This score in combination with the preliminary holistic rating accounts for 44 percent of the variability in the final essay. Not as high as the 48 percent for essay and ACT scores, but respectable all the same, and we can use it. While the ACT English and the preliminary holistic rating are workable for entrance testing, they are not the best combination for determining freshman composition entrance for students who have spent a semester under remediation, or who for other reasons are testing for a second time. We need a way of knowing if these students have made enough progress to enter the regular course, and using the ACT presents problems. Whereas the student's academic level may have changed over the semester, the available ACT score would be the same as at the beginning of the semester.

We therefore have gone to using a holistic essay rating plus an error count on that essay as a freshman composition entrance test for students who are testing for the second time. What we will do is set up a committee of writing teachers, who will decide on a topic for the impromptu essay and, after a

training session on reliable holistic rating, will read and score the essays, finally counting errors in the first 150 words.

This committee will determine whether the students tested have reached a level of competence for entering freshman composition.

So, while error count was not the best predictor of successful completion of our freshman composition course, its high correlation with essay ratings supports its use as an additional measure of writing competence.

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SAMPLE GRADING SHEET FOR 101 ENTRANCE EXAM

STUDENT'S NAME _____
 TEST DATE _____
 GRADER'S NAME _____

1. Sentence boundary problems (count each error)

A. Fragments	1	2	3	4
B. Comma splices and run-ons	1	2	3	4

2. Faulty word forms (count each error)

A. Plural markers (nouns)	1	2	3	4
B. Tense markers				
1. -ed for past				
2. irregular verb forms				
3. 3rd person singular present				

	1	2	3	4
--	---	---	---	---

3. Subject verb agreement (count each error)

	1	2	3	4
--	---	---	---	---

(If all errors are below line, 101 is recommended)

4. Pronouns (count errors only once)

A. Case	1
B. Number agreement	1
C. Reference	1

5. Word mechanics

A. Omitted words	1
B. Misspelled words	1
C. Apostrophe missed or misused	1

Total _____

Recommend:

(three or fewer errors) 101 _____

9 189.50 _____

TABLE 1. CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS OF SELECTED PREDICTOR
VARIABLES AND POST HOLISTIC RATING OF ESSAYS

n=103	ACT-E	ACT-SS	Al.Err.	Cloze	Es.Err.	Es.Rat.I	Es.Rat.II
ACT English	1.000	.620	-.526	-.738	-.489	.649	.611
ACT Soc.St.		1.000	-.177	-.519	-.275	.348	.254
"Al." Errors			1.000	.542	.543	-.527	-.467
Cloze Errors				1.000	.477	-.650	-.527
Essay Errors					1.000	-.640	-.505
Essay Rating I						1.000	.649
Essay Rating II							1.000

$p < .05$ when $R > .195$.

$p < .01$ when $R > .254$.

TABLE 2. RECOMMENDED SCALE OF ESSAY SCORES AND ACT ENGLISH SCORES
FOR DETERMINING ENTRANCE INTO ENGLISH 101

Essay Score	ACT English Score
3.00 (C)	8
2.85	10
2.64	12
2.43	14
2.32	16
2.22	17
2.00 (D)	18
1.80	20
1.58	22
1.37	24
1.16	25
1.00 (F)	28

Applying this table, we would require a student with an ACT English score of 8 to have an essay score of 3. An essay score of 2 must be accompanied by an ACT English score of 18, and a student scoring has little chance of success without an ACT score of 28.